Reflections on SE Asia
July 2020

It is better to travel well than to arrive.

Buddhist lesson

It is impossible to write about SE Asia (Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos and Thailand) with any depth of understanding having only spent three weeks traveling there. Plus Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos are new to me and it has been 20 plus years since I last visited Thailand. Instead I provide my reflections mostly through pictures of the region organized by themes. It was beautiful, exotic, peaceful, engaging, spiritual, friendly, challenging, enchanting, confounding and mesmerizing. Pure magic!

Historical Resilience. The region is ancient. It has a complex history of long forgotten (to us) empires, colonial exploitation, war and yet continuity, perseverance and hope remain. Communism, socialism, autocratic monarchies, capitalism, Buddhism, animism and entreprenuerism are woven together in an exciting, inspiring way. The juxtaposition of old and new is startling in a refreshing and futuristic way.

Beauty. Beauty in this region of the world is obvious, but looking beneath the surface allows the observer to see a deeper beauty, be it in a temple, a crowded street, marketplace or a simple sunset. The traffic, for example, is relentless and it seems chaotic. However, there is order amid the chaos (the yin yang dynamic). Follow the unspoken rules for crossing a street in a major city like Hanoi. It is orchestrated like performance art. Keep walking forward. Don’t stop or go back and don’t change your pace. The motorbike, automobile traffic and other pedestrians will just

flow around you. But remember to watch out for motor bikes on sidewalks, in public markets and going opposite of the traffic’s direction on streets.

Developmental Challenges. A Rolls Royce dealership and a hotel share a Spirit House in Hanoi. Huge dams, hydroelectric facilities and bridges interrupt the Mekong in remote areas of Laos where water buffalo congregate, groups pan for gold and fishermen seek a dwindling supply of fish from the river amid environmental concerns. A generation with access to the internet and social media seek new freedoms and the ability to vote for their political candidates of choice amidst poor human rights records and authoritarian governments. A six year old boy high fives me as we walk through his remote Hmong village. More Cambodian temples are now open to visitors after having nearby areas cleared of unexploded ordnance from the war years. Flashy international boutiques serve patrons of one era, while the street market life a thousand years old unfolds daily on the sidewalks out front. Toyota Camrys (symbols of affluence) clog the roads once dominated by rickshaws, bicycles, Tuk Tuks and motor bikes. Buddhist Monks walk through the streets at dawn collecting their alms from locals as well as tourists. Building cranes fill the sky. Smiles of peace and hope are everywhere.

Lessons Learned:

1. Take the road less traveled.
2. Seek a variety of experiences in your travel destination so you can view and appreciate life in its many manifestations.
3. Document your travel experiences in pictures, sounds and words.
4. Share your experiences and insights with others.